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SUBJECT: Status of Sabaeans in Kirkuk Province

This is a PRT Kirkuk reporting cable.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: PRT officers traveled to the Sabaean temple in Kirkuk City in December to meet with Sabaean leaders. The Sabaeans, numbering approximately 173 families in Kirkuk province, listed cultural and linguistic preservation, unemployment, and inclusion in governmental jobs as their primary concerns. According to Sheik Raad, high priest in Kirkuk, Sabaeans in the South of Iraq are still being persecuted, with many fleeing to the Northern provinces. The Sabaeans asked the PRT for help preserving their heritage, and asked about building a Sabaean cultural center in Kirkuk City. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On December 10, PRT Team Leader and two PolOffs visited the Sabaean temple in Kirkuk City. A Sabaean Bilingual Bicultural Advisor (BBA) on the PRT arranged the meeting through his contacts in the Sabaean community. The Sabaean leaders expressed interest in meeting the PRT to discuss the concerns of the Sabaean community, and to open lines of communication with the USG. NOTE: According to the Sabaeans with whom we spoke, they are referred to as Sabaeans in Arabic, and Mandaeans in their native tongue (a dialect of Aramaic). The two terms are interchangeable. END NOTE.

13. (U) The Sabaeans are an ancient people that traces its lineage back to the Sumerians. The Sabaean religion, by their account, predates Christianity by one thousand years. They revere John the Baptist as one of their greatest teachers, but trace the origins of their religion back to the time of Adam. The Sabaean religion is often considered the last surviving Gnostic religion that is actively practiced in the world. Water and baptism play an important role in all Sabaean religious practices, and until recently all religious activities were held at rivers.

14. (SBU) The Sabaean Temple in Kirkuk is located in the Southeast sector of the city in a predominantly Arab area called Hai Al Dubat. The Sabaean compound consists of a two meeting halls, a small prayer pool, a small school house, and a grassy area. The compound is surrounded by a 6-7 foot wall on all sides.

15. (SBU) In the meeting hall, Sheik Raad, the head priest, addressed a congregation of approximately 50 Sabaeans and the PRT. He stated that the Sabaeans are in danger of losing their cultural and linguistic heritage. Under Saddam Hussein the Sabaeans were prevented from speaking their language, now there are only three or four speakers of the ancient Sabaean tongue left in Iraq (one of them in the congregation in Kirkuk, a very old man). Sabaeans in the South of Iraq are still being persecuted by Islamist Shia groups, and many are fleeing to Kirkuk, Erbil, and Suleimaniya. By his estimate, there are approximately 173 Sabaean families in Kirkuk province now. Sheik Raad complained that the Sabaeans are not getting a chance to play a role in Iraqi society, and they desire more government jobs. He did admit that the inclusion of Safaa Ibrahim, a local Sabaeon, on the Kirkuk City Council is a significant step forward.

16. (U) Other Sabaeans also addressed the PRT in the meeting hall. One young man stood up and stated that many Sabaeans are well educated, but are unable to find jobs due to discriminatory hiring practices. Others stated that Sabaeans are underrepresented in the

Iraqi police and other higher level governmental positions.

¶7. (U) Following the assembly in the meeting hall, Sheik Raad led the PRT outside to the prayer pool where most of the Sabaeans religious practices are held. Until the 1970's Sabaeans in Iraq held all religious ceremonies at rivers. This practice went away when the rivers in Iraq became too polluted to hold baptisms. Now most Sabaeans in Iraq use pools of water where an inflow and outflow system keeps the water moving. The flowing of water, similar to a river, is an important part of the Sabaeans religion as it reflects the constantly flowing cycle of life.

¶8. (U) Sheik Raad then led the PRT into the second meeting room; a large domed structure richly furnished with gold colored couches and polished wooden tables. At the front of this room was a raised platform with two glass cases. The first glass case contained the Sabaeans Holy Book, written in Aramaic. The second glass case held a statue of a wooden cross with a piece of cloth over it and an olive leaf. The cross represents the four points of a compass, the cloth represents the vestments of John the Baptist, and the olive leaf represents sustenance. The room also contained a large portrait of Sheik Dakheel, a famous Sabaeans priest who worked hard in the mid 20th century to keep the Sabaeans people viable in Iraq.

¶9. (U) Finally the PRT entered a small, sparsely furnished school house, containing a few large mostly empty book shelves and approximately twenty school chairs/desks. Sheik Raad stated that the Sabaeans are attempting to keep their language alive by teaching it to the younger students in the congregation. He complained that they do not have the resources to be successful in this endeavor. Sheik Raad asked the PRT for help in this area, and asked about the possibility of building a Sabaeans cultural center in the city. Sheik

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Raad ended the visit by thanking the PRT for taking an interest in the plight of the Sabaeans and inviting it to observe a baptism or marriage ceremony sometime in the near future.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The treatment of and attitude toward the Sabaeans by the other Iraqis will be a good barometer of respect for the rights of other minorities (whether religious or otherwise) in the province. If the non-Sabaeans support the proposed Sabean cultural center (by tolerating its existence, or better yet, by supporting the use of government funds to create and maintain it), it will bode well for relations among the various ethnic and religious groups in the province. While the Sabaeans are not directly threatened by any specific group in the Kirkuk, they lack political influence and their small community risks slowly disappearing from Iraq through emigration. End comment.

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